Public Health Then and Now

Benjamin Rush on Health and the American Revolution

GEORGE ROSEN, MD, PHD

The signers of the Declaration of Independence were a varied lot comprising merchants, lawyers, landed gentry, farmers, and political agitators as well as several medical men prominent in the colonies. Indeed, the first signature on the Declaration is that of Josiah Bartlett, a physician who represented "the most Easterly Province," and in 1793 became the first governor of New Hampshire. Another medical signer was Lyman Hall of Georgia, who became governor of his state in 1783 and was instrumental in establishing a state university. Best known today is Benjamin Rush (1746–1813) of Philadelphia, who as a leading physician and teacher not only exerted an important influence on the practitioners of his time and for several generations after his death, but is also regarded as the father of American psychiatry because of his pioneer endeavor to raise the study and treatment of mental and emotional illness to a systematic, scientific level. (For this reason the American Psychiatric Association established an annual Benjamin Rush Lecture on Psychiatric History which I inaugurated in May 1967.) In this bicentennial year, therefore, it may be of interest in the light of his political and medical experience to examine how Rush viewed the impact of the American Revolution on the health of his contemporaries.

Benjamin Rush was born in Byberry, Pennsylvania, the son of a farmer and gunsmith. After graduating from the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University) in 1760, he was apprenticed to John Redman, a Philadelphia physician. In August 1766, he entered the University of Edinburgh and received his medical degree in June 1768 after presenting a thesis on gastric digestion, *De coctione ciborum in ventriculo*, based on several experiments performed on himself and friends. Shortly after his return to Philadelphia in 1769, Rush was elected professor of chemistry in the College of Philadelphia (now the University of Pennsylvania) and began the practice of medicine.

Rush was an early and ardent proponent of American independence. In Edinburgh he had adopted republican principles, and in Philadelphia he became actively involved in colonial resistance to the Crown. In 1776, he was elected to the Continental Congress and signed the Declaration of Independence. Rush joined the Continental Army in December of that year and from April 1777 to January 1778 served as surgeon-general of the armies of the Middle Department. But differences arose between Rush and William Shippen, the director-general of the medical service, which led to his resignation and resumption of private practice in Philadelphia. In 1789, he was appointed professor of the theory and practice of medicine in the medical faculty of the College of Philadelphia.

At the same time, Rush continued to advance national unity and foster political stability in the young American republic. Thus he advocated adoption of the Constitution, and helped to frame the Pennsylvania state constitution of 1790. From 1797 to 1813, he served as treasurer of the United States Mint.

Like his contemporaries Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, Rush was a representative of the American Enlightenment. A major impulsion toward action for the public good was to release mankind from the trammels of ignorance and to improve the conditions of life in a rational manner. Consequently Rush advocated a national system of education, with various state-supported schools, including a national university and technical schools. He also championed higher education for women, and was largely responsible for the founding of Dickinson College in western Pennsylvania. He was also a principal founder, in 1786, of the Philadelphia Dispensary for the Poor, the first free dispensary in the United States. The abolition of slavery, temperance and penal reform were other causes for which Rush worked. He was an early and passionate proponent of the abolitionist cause, serving as president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery. Rush was a strong advocate of temperance and legal control of drinking. In 1787, together with Benjamin Franklin and several like-minded men, he organized the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons. This group succeeded in having the death penalty in Pennsylvania abolished for all crimes except murder in the first degree.

Underlying Rush's medical, political, and reform activities were a group of ideas within which those on the social

relations of health are of considerable interest. Rush shared these views with a number of his contemporaries, among them Thomas Jefferson, David Rittenhouse, and Thomas Paine. They held that the creator had so designed the human body that it would flourish when it lived in harmony with its political and social environment and conversely He had so framed the political order that human health was fostered by good social institutions. Rush was quite explicit on this point. In his *Inquiry into the Natural History of Medicine among the Indians of North America*, read before the American Philosophical Society in 1774, he observed that political institutions, economic organization, and disease were so interrelated that any general social change produced accompanying changes in health.[1] Twenty-five years later, in 1799, Rush published *Three Lectures on Animal Life* in which he reiterated this position.[2]

This linkage of biological states and socioeconomic organization was applied by Rush to a concrete case in his *Account of the Influence of the Military and Political Events of the American Revolution upon the Human Body*.[3] His views are of interest because he called attention to the effects of acute political and social changes on health conditions, particularly mental health, placing such phenomena in a theoretical context, derived partly from his medical and partly from his social views. His basic premise was that health required a social environment which would provide the proper stimuli and necessary conditions for well-being.[4] Thus, Rush was not surprised that during the Revolution good health was the lot of the patriots. "An uncommon cheerfulness," he wrote, "prevailed everywhere among the friends of the Revolution. Defeats, and even the loss of relations and property, were soon forgotten in the great objects of the war." More specifically, Rush observed among other findings that hysterical women who favored the Revolution were cured of their condition. Furthermore, "marriages were more fruitful than in former years, and . . . a considerable number of unfruitful marriages became fruitful during the war. Finally, many persons who had been sickly were restored to perfect health owing to change of occupation or location as a result of war conditions."[5]

Sharply contrasted with the good health of the patriots was the mental and physical breakdown experienced by the Loyalists. In many instances they suffered from a hypochondriasis, which was popularly called the "protection fever" and which Rush termed *Revolutiana*. It was called "protection fever" because it appeared to arise from the excessive concern of the Loyalists for the protection of their persons and possessions. This basic cause was accentuated by such other factors as loss of power and influence, the suspension of the Established Church, changes in manners and diet as a result of inflation, and lastly the legal and extralegal oppression to which the Loyalists were subjected.

These effects upon the human body were produced through the medium of the mind. Thus, the patriots themselves were not necessarily immune to such conditions, and Rush observed that following the peace in 1783, the Americans, unprepared for their new situation, were affected by an excess of liberty.

"The excess of the passion for liberty," Rush wrote, "inflamed by the successful issue of the war, produced, in many people, opinions and conduct which could not be removed by reason nor restrained by government. For a while, they threatened to render abortive the goodness of heaven to the United States, in delivering them from the evils of slavery and war. The extensive influence which these opinions had upon the understandings, passions and morals of many of the citizens of the United States, constituted a species of insanity, which I shall take the liberty of distinguishing by the name of *Anarchia*."[6]

Clearly, excess in society affected the mind and produced a kind of excitement which might become incurable. On this ground Rush held that industrialization and urban growth should not be fostered too rapidly or excessively. "Let us be cautious," he said, "what kind of manufacturers we admit among us. The rickets made their first appearance in the manufacturing towns in England. Dr. Fothergill informed me, that he had often observed, when a pupil, that the greatest part of the chronic patients in the London Hospital were Spittal-field weavers. . . . Perhaps a pure air and the abstraction of spirituous liquors might render sedentary employments less unhealthy in America, even among men, than in the populous towns of Great Britain."[7]

Benjamin Rush was a man of his time and his views may seem crude by our standards. It is clear, however, that his ideas and observations on the reciprocal relations between society and human health deserve attention and examination as those of a pioneer in the evolution of American medicine and public health.

REFERENCES

1. *Benjamin Rush: Medical Inquiries and Observations . . . .*, vol. 1, 2nd American edition, Philadelphia, Thomas Dobson, 1794, pp. 24–25.
2. Dagobert D. Runes (ed.). *Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush*, New York, Philosophical Library, 1947, pp. 167–168.
3. Rush, *Medical Inquiries* . . . vol. 1, pp. 263–278.
4. For a more extensive discussion of this principle and its context in the 18th century see George Rosen: Political Order and Human Health in Jeffersonian Thought, *Bull. Hist. Med.* 26:32–44, 1952; ibid.: Social Stress and Mental Disease from the Eighteenth Century to the Present, *Milbank Mem. Fund Quart.* 37:5–32, 1959.
5. Rush, *Medical Inquiries* . . . vol. 1, pp. 273–274.
6. Ibid., p. 277.
7. Ibid., p. 74.

SELECTED REFERENCES

The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush. Edited by George W. Corner, Princeton University Press, 1948.

The Letters of Benjamin Rush, Edited by L. H. Butterfield, 2 vols., Princeton University Press, 1951.

Carl Binger: *Revolutionary Doctor: Benjamin Rush*, New York, Norton, 1966.

Nathan G. Goodman: *Benjamin Rush: Physician and Citizen, 1746–1813*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1934.

Richard H. Shryock: The medical reputation of Benjamin Rush: contrasts over two centuries, *Bull. Hist. Med.* 45:507–552, 1971.